

The Case For Auschwitz

A Review

[Henry Gardner](#)

By Robert Jan van Pelt, Indiana University Press Bloomington, IN 2002. 570 pp., with notes, bibliography, indexed.

It is strange that an event, or rather a series of events that have marked the history of the 20th century perhaps more strongly than any other with the possible exception of the annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, should never have generated any kind of true historical debate. Whatever exchange of arguments did occur, took on the form of a dialog the French call *un dialogue de sourds* – the other side does not exist.

One of the reasons for this lack of an open exchange of ideas may be the fact that for nearly fifty years the camps at Auschwitz and Birkenau, were, if not inaccessible, at least not open to independent researchers; moreover, it was not even known to the general public that an enormous amount of documents had survived the end of World War Two, safely tucked away in Soviet and other archives.

It is the merit of Professor Robert J. van Pelt to have put Auschwitz back on the European map with the well-researched and most readable book on the history of the town and its region, *Auschwitz, 1270 to the Present*, which he wrote together with Deborah Dwork. After the famous trial in early 2000 in which David Irving sued Penguin Books and Deborah Lipstadt for libel, professor van Pelt summed up his work for the defendants in a further book, *The Case for Auschwitz*. This work is much less easy to read than the previous one, as it presents an incoherent selection of snippets from the history of the camp and disappoints the reader who was hoping for a comprehensive and conclusive presentation.

Now, good books should make you think, and in that sense *The Case...* is a good book. It makes you wonder about quite a number of things, especially if it is read together with other publications on this painful subject such as Roseman's second thoughts – reconsiderations as he calls them – on the Wannsee conference in which he does away with many a cherished dogma, Hilberg's book on the sources of the Holocaust which quietly drops such long-standing and formerly essential witnesses as Kurt Gerstein or Jan Karski, or Yehuda Bauer's *Rethinking the Holocaust* which mentions in passing that the Nazi regime was not as totalitarian as most people seem to think or speaks of the difficulty of documenting the really central events of the Holocaust. This short list of recent critical writings about the German persecution of the European Jews is far from complete, particularly if one thinks of Fritjof Meyer's article in *Osteuropa* (5/2002) which, in spite of its many errors, certainly opened up new vistas.

Yet Another Book on Auschwitz

Faced with this array of publications that somehow stray from previous positions, the reader begins to feel that there is a kind of quiet redeployment of forces going on behind the scenes, with fictional treatments crowding center stage, and academic works with rather different viewpoints being published away from the public eye. Taking things a little further, the reader wonders about the way in which a revolutionary reassessment might take place, if it ever came to that. He comes to the conclusion that by all means one would try to avoid upsetting the traditional apple-cart and to make this a very much drawn-out affair with a great deal of smoke being generated to cover a more or less orderly retreat. The

objective would be to gain as much time as possible for a consolidation of essential acquisitions, but also to relegate the whole matter to the realm of history, hoping that only a few researchers will spend time and energy on these questions. As long as much political or other profit can be reaped from the present state of things, however, there will be a tendency to keep the old ideas alive, in spite of any new evidence. Perhaps this book on Auschwitz is an example of the strain that has developed in this field of history.

Robert J. van Pelt confronts us with a copious serving of materials which he has grouped according to the type of source – intentional, legal, accidental – but in the end all this fails to convince that van Pelt really has a case. It is one thing to fend off a plaintiff in a libel suit before an English court, but quite another to sum up the evidence in such a way that an unbiased public will accept the arguments.



Robert Jan van Pelt speaks at the Fifth Simon Wiesenthal Lecture, Vienna, 16 June 2011
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Van Pelt's work is not, in the academic sense, a treatise based on a coherent progression of hypotheses and arguments that eventually arrives at a conclusion. It is, rather, a composite structure of many elements, no single one of which is really conclusive in itself or indispensable to the whole case. The author presents them to us and then selects from them individual traces which, when he views them as a whole, amount to some sort of evidence, a "convergence" of proof.

There are (at least) two things that appear odd about this procedure. The major one is the underlying tacit admission by the author that there is no indisputable proof of the uniqueness, singularity or whatever qualifier one might choose, of the Auschwitz crimes. The minor one is that by applying such a method, the author rejects the old legal rule "*in dubio pro reo*" – that in case of doubt one should rule in

favor of the accused; on the contrary, van Pelt interprets spurious items as he thinks fit and seems to hold that, at some point, a sufficient quantity of questionable elements will fuse into a new whole and serve as solid evidence against the accused.

The author was certainly not a lone wolf working on his own, and it would be surprising if he had not been aware or had not been made aware of these faults in his reasoning. One is thus led to think that perhaps David Irving, by taking the great risk of launching his libel suit, secretly intended to call the cards of his opponents and that we now see their hand, in the form of van Pelt's book.

Pravda, or the Truth?

If that actually was Irving's intention, it certainly paid off in spite of the defeat he suffered in court, because one can henceforth concentrate on what appear to be the essential arguments in the case for Auschwitz. Before we consider some of them in more detail, it is worthwhile noting van Pelt's explicit statement that the official history of the camp, i.e. what was said about it once the Soviets had reached it, started with an outright invention and a monumental error, which some other people might be tempted to call a lie. The former is the statement by the reporter working for the Soviet party newspaper *Pravda* (Truth) that a high-voltage conveyor belt first electrocuted the victims and then dropped them into a blast furnace. The latter is the figure of 4 million victims announced in the Soviet special report published in May 1945. Until the fall of the Soviet empire, this figure was inscribed on metal tablets in the Auschwitz camp for all visitors to see; the figure has since been drastically reduced. The "Death Factory" with its mass electrocutions and subsequent hellish fire was later dropped in favor of the notionally more realistic gas chambers and crematoria.

The initial prevarications may perhaps be explained by the hue and cry of the last months of World War Two. Quietly dropping the impossible technical details was a relatively easy thing to do, although similar nonsense regarding the other German camps in Poland is part of the Nuremberg documents and therefore still legally binding for historians in some countries. The fact, however, that the figure of 4 million victims was a major element in the official presentation of the camp for a period of nearly fifty years shows the difficulty of charting a new course in these murky waters.

Naturally, one may argue that it matters little whether the present official figure of 1 million victims is true and the previous total was not, and perhaps morally there is a point here, but we must not forget that the basic argument regarding Auschwitz is not that masses of people were killed at that site (things like that have happened throughout history, unfortunately, and very much so during World War Two), but rather that, at Auschwitz, the outrageously high number of victims made it necessary for the perpetrators to invent, implement and perfect an industrial way of killing and that this "machinery of death" constitutes a new quality in the long list of horrors man has inflicted upon his fellows.

The figure of 4 million victims thus served a double purpose. On the one hand, the Soviets used it to hide their own and – in time as well as in scope - far more extensive atrocities and, on the other, it conferred a new dimension upon the crimes committed by the Nazis and allowed the victors of World War II to justify any and all of their actions as being irreproachable in the fight against such a devilish enemy. Taking a step back, we find ourselves facing a circular argument: the enormity of the number of victims and the corresponding machine-like manner in which they were killed gave a quality of its own to the Auschwitz site, and because of this uniqueness it was henceforth futile to whittle down the numbers. Therefore, if one wants to gain a real insight into the case of Auschwitz, it is of great

importance to evaluate the actual number of people who died there and the circumstances of their death – something that Fritjof Meyer has tried to do in a lame sort of way. What is needed now is not so much a computation from the top down, but a kind of zero-base analysis, a scrutiny of all the underpinnings of what many people regard as the crime of the millennium.

In doing so, one should not forget that the history of the Western World after World War Two rests, in its very essence, on our view of Auschwitz, and it does so in a multitude of ways, politically, morally, and economically. What is more, our perception of Auschwitz also shapes the future of our part of the world and while it is fairly safe to stick with traditional views when it comes to the West's present political situation, these questions take on a different significance when we look at the problems that lie ahead.

But let us not diverge too far from our subject which is, after all, Robert J. van Pelt's book, and let us take a closer look at some of the details he discusses.

A Witness

In the chapter "Intentional Evidence" there is, for example, the witness Janda Weiss. He came to Auschwitz when he was 14 years old and, strangely enough, was not sent to the gas chamber right away, in spite of his young age. Instead, he was put to work as a kitchen helper and took food to the crematorium *Sonderkommando* to which he would a year later be assigned himself. Like so many other such witnesses, he was spared the fate that allegedly struck this unit regularly, and survived to tell his tale.

For a number of procedural reasons - Weiss made specific allegations and provided specific details - van Pelt agrees with Wilhelm Staeglich, the arch-revisionist, that Weiss should be taken seriously as a witness. So far, so good. But if we examine what Weiss had to say, at least two of the details he provided are so ludicrous as to disqualify him entirely.

There is, first of all, the story of elderly people being carted away from the "ramp" on a dump truck that took them straight to the burning trenches and tipped them into the fire alive. Leaving aside the question of whether it was possible to drive a heavy truck across the swampy ground of Birkenau without getting stuck, we reach a limit when we imagine this truck being carefully backed up to the edge of a trench blazing with fire and then dumping its uncooperative load. This can simply not be done in a matter of seconds and there is thus a serious risk of the truck catching fire or even exploding in the process. Any German soldier foolish enough to undertake such a highly risky and totally useless operation would certainly have been court-martialed for endangering government property, if not for outright sabotage.

There is also the question of what these trenches looked like: either the sides of the trench were banked, in which case the truck could not get close enough to the fire in such an operation, or if the banks were vertical, the tail end of the truck would extend into the flames and the edge of this makeshift trench would eventually crumble with disastrous results.

The other point where Weiss is talking nonsense is when he speaks about the lungs of the victims bursting from the gas, with a loud clamoring noise being heard three minutes after the gas had been fed into the chambers. He seems to imagine the lungs of the victims ballooning and eventually reaching the limits of the constraining power of the rib-cage. Sixty years on, the toxic effects of hydrocyanic acid

should be clear to all concerned, and this statement alone should have convinced an intelligent person like van Pelt that the witness, at best, is reporting (false) hear-say but cannot himself be taken seriously.

This is only one example of many where the sources quoted by van Pelt are presented uncritically; this results in reports containing information that might be true if it were not for statements by the same person that clearly are not. This manner of presentation makes reading van Pelt's book a difficult task. The reader has the feeling that the intention was less one of underpinning the traditional view of what happened at Auschwitz than one of confusing the other side by an assembly of truths, half-truths and errors, a jumble that has to be cleared before any real progress can be made in the discussion. This kind of tactic is akin to the blowing up of bridges behind an army in retreat, with the aim of slowing down the pursuers and keeping them occupied while new fortifications are being prepared.

The Gas Chambers

The centerpiece of any factual account of what happened or did not happen at the Auschwitz and Birkenau camps should be the discussion of the gas chambers, alleged or real. This topic is, of course, linked with that of the crematoria, so much so that the reader at large often confuses one with the other. Whereas for decades many authors maintained the belief that the crematoria were built specifically for the purpose of implementing the Holocaust, van Pelt's opinion is not as blunt.

In their book on the history of the region of Auschwitz, van Pelt and Dwork speak only of the two smaller crematoria (IV and V at Birkenau) as having been purpose-built as extermination sites, the other two (II and III) having only later been modified for the purpose. They spend quite some time on the subject of Crematorium II which had initially been designed for the main camp at Auschwitz but was eventually built at Birkenau.

The "Chute"

One of the points they scrutinize in particular with respect to this change of purpose and location is the access to the basement morgues. In the proposed design for Auschwitz, in late 1941, an entryway to a lower floor was located within the building and included, between two parallel flights of stairs, an item that the authors call a chute. The upper end of this stairway connected to a landing with a door towards the outside; the lower end was located in a vestibule from which an elevator provided the connection with the furnace room. Dwork and van Pelt attribute great importance to the fact that, when the original drawings were adapted for the Birkenau site, the SS design office did away with this chute. They argue that the reason for this modification was a change in the intended use of the crematorium – originally, "corpses were dropped through a chute but now live victims would walk to their death."

The history of this chute is quite interesting: for a new crematorium, the SS design office at Auschwitz had proposed, in late October, 1941, a layout with a flight of stairs leading from an open porch to two morgues ("length as needed") on the floor below, but without a chute. A month later, more detailed drawings were executed in Berlin, the entrance area was changed to a design more in keeping with the rest of the building, the access to the lower floor was moved to the other side, made wider, and a chute was added. Also, the location of the whole building, still within the main camp, seems to have been determined at that point, because these new drawings show a specific orientation. In February, 1942, this location appears on a layout plan for the main camp, shown on Plate 7 of the book by Dwork and van Pelt (*Auschwitz, 1270 ...*).

The proposed site in the main camp was much too small to allow the incorporation of any morgues of the kind built later at Birkenau. The location, next to the small crematorium already existing, precluded anything but one short mortuary to be built, with its longitudinal axis perpendicular to the crematorium itself and a direct entrance to it would have used up even more space. Hence, when the location was changed from the main camp to Birkenau, modifications became not only possible but mandatory on account of the larger population of detainees and the rampant epidemics. Therefore, the major change in the design was the re-incorporation of two large morgues on the lower floor with direct access to one of them.

Dwork and van Pelt are not the only authors speaking of a "chute." Franciszek Piper of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum also mentions such an item, not only for the planning stage but as an actual part of Crematorium III, which had a layout similar to Crematorium II, but not absolutely identical to it. In the book *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* he writes (p. 168): "Crematorium III had a second entrance ... In addition to the stairway it housed a special concrete chute (*Rutsche*) through which corpses ... were lowered straight down to the elevator shaft," but he does not explain how this chute functioned; for corpses, some kind of metal half-pipe might have been suitable, but a concrete one much less so. In the face of Piper's statement about the chute in Crematorium III, the argument brought forth by Dwork and van Pelt becomes rather weak

When it was decided to move the proposed crematorium to Birkenau other conditions, too, changed quite a bit. The ground at Birkenau was so swampy and the water-table so high that the lower floor could not be put completely underground; in fact, the ceiling slab of the morgues stuck out by about 90 centimeters. The differences in the type of ground between Auschwitz and Birkenau are clearly shown in various illustrations in the van Pelt / Dwork book; the photograph of construction work in the main camp on p. 232 is particularly telling when compared to the flooded drainage ditch being dug at Birkenau, p. 193, or to the ditch on p. 323, also full of water, in the "Kanada" section.

As far as the entrance to the morgues was concerned, the consequences imposed by these conditions were two-fold: at least in the case of Crematorium II for which van Pelt and others provide drawings, we can see that the original exit at the head of the stairs-cum-slide would now be blocked by the banked earthwork that was to cover the protruding part of the morgue next to it. Therefore, some other access to the basement became necessary (it may be that parts of the chute already built were simply blocked off). At Crematorium III, from what F. Piper says, this was avoided, possibly by a slight displacement of the morgue, which allowed the former stairwell with its chute to be retained. In both cases, around these crematoria there was enough room for a new, direct, straight and wide access to one of the morgues to be installed there; what remains of these steps is shown on p. 213 of *The Case...* for Crematorium II. The other morgue in the two crematoria, the alleged gassing room, was too close to a fence to allow such an access to be created.

These modifications presented obvious advantages: there was a direct access to the morgue area and stretchers could be handled with ease; furthermore, a new second entrance (at least for Crematorium II) or the old stairway-cum chute (at Crematorium III) allowed service personnel to enter the basement rooms without having to pass through the mortuary area.

The Doors

The layout of the underground facilities of Crematorium II (and III, of similar design) is discussed at length in *The Case...*. One of the details to which van Pelt attributes great importance is the fact that when the stairs-cum-slide were abandoned for Crematorium II the double door leading into Morgue 1 (the alleged gas chamber) was turned around: it had formerly swung into the morgue and would now swing into the vestibule. Whether the doors should swing one way or the other in a homicidal gas chamber is, however, not so easy to answer, as we shall see further on.

The question of the way those doors opened is fairly involved. Leuchter, in his report about gas chambers, had argued that doors swinging into a gas-chamber would be difficult to open because of corpses piling up against them from the inside, and so van Pelt was pleased when he could show that the re-design of Crematorium II for its installation at Birkenau had also led to a re-orientation of the doors of Morgue 1 which now opened outwards. Part of the reason for this change is, however, the fact that those doors formerly had to open inwards, because they would otherwise have obstructed the foot of the stairs-cum-slide. With that element out of the way there was now a choice.

Although the various drawings of the underground facilities of these crematoria published by van Pelt always show double doors, ca. 2 m wide, for Piper the entrance to the alleged gas chamber measured only 1.92 by 1 meter wide (*Anatomy ...*, p. 166). Piper does not say which way this narrow door opened.

Piper has spent his whole professional life at Auschwitz; R.J. van Pelt and his staff have visited the site and made detailed investigations there, and yet the two are not in agreement on what may be an essential element of the gas chambers - perhaps Yehuda Bauer was thinking of discrepancies like these when he spoke of the difficulty of documenting the Holocaust.

The Crowd

These design considerations direct our attention to a question which has not been treated in much detail in the many works on the subject, be they affirmative or revisionist: How does one move hundreds or even more than a thousand naked people calmly and efficiently from the undressing room to the gassing chamber? This is not as easy as it sounds, because one has to take into account the layout of those underground chambers and, anyway, crowd control is never a simple matter, especially if the crowd is mortally fearful.

A few figures, first of all: from the drawings and photographs published in *The Case...* and elsewhere one can deduce that the "undressing room" measured about 8 m in width by 50 m in length, or about 400 sqm, whereas the "gassing chamber" was smaller: about 7 m wide and 30 m long, i.e. roughly 200 sqm.

This reviewer does not wish to argue about how many people one can actually squeeze into the space of a square meter (= 10 square feet) in order to kill them. What is more interesting is how much space they needed for undressing and arranging their clothes in a reasonably calm way – certainly for getting ready to go into the "bath" they will need a lot more space than the one square foot per head van Pelt allows them for the final kill. The undressing room is about twice the size of the "gassing chamber", but even if this now thins such a crowd to something like four persons on a square meter (or one on a square of 50 by 50 cm), the people cannot possibly undress in an orderly fashion and unrest will most certainly start spreading among the victims-to-be, if not already present.

Therefore, it is not convincing that the large crematoria were able to handle such masses of people at one time. To a certain extent, however, it is not even necessary to argue this point in one way or

another, because for any mass killings, the bottleneck would be the crematoria, and there would always be enough time to divide large groups into smaller ones and spread the gassing operations.

Be that as it may, we are told that the still-unsuspecting victims, hundreds or even two thousand at one time, would walk down the ten steps from the outside, strip, leave their clothes somewhere in the undressing hall and then move on through a double door on the other side of the room. Before reaching this double door, they would have to squeeze into a passage about 5 meters long where the width of the hall (some 8 meters) suddenly narrowed to something like 2 meters. Once through this double door (let us assume that both wings of the door stood open) the victims would find themselves in a vestibule with a free floor area of about 4 by 4 meters, no windows, several closed doors facing them and something like a freight elevator against the opposite wall. Here, they were expected to make a 90-degree turn and enter the "bath" which, at least for van Pelt, again had a double door, 2 m wide (opening against them, we are told). If we are to believe Piper, the crowd of victims had to squeeze through a single door half the width that van Pelt assigns to it.

Why did this crowd of frightened and naked people move at all? Well, somewhere behind them there were ferocious SS men with whips, and possibly dogs, yelling at them to move ahead, but as soon as the first ones to reach the gas chamber would have realized that there were no real showers, shouted that it was all fake and tried to make their way back against the advancing crowd, one can easily imagine that all would come to a stand-still in the narrow passage and the vestibule. The cordon of SS-men at the rear could beat the hell out of the poor naked people near them, but that would not hurt those further away; panic would ensue, with corpses piling up in the constricted space of the passage and the vestibule, and the dozen or so SS men somewhere at the back would be in great danger of being torn to pieces by the desperate crowd of hundreds of people milling around them.

As long as the victims were old people and young children, there might not be much active resistance, but we also hear that large groups of French and other fighters from the underground were killed in this way. It is doubtful that, in general, the victims were thoroughly searched before departure; certainly this was not done on arrival to those selected to be gassed and thus it would have been very easy for some of the doomed to hide knives or other weapons which would come in useful at close quarters, or they might simply use their bare hands.

If someone, in the turmoil, managed to jam the door to the "bath" (that was easy enough to do as it now opened outwards) there would be no way but to hack the crowd to pieces and then try to start over again, although in that case the survivors would no longer let themselves be led like lambs to the slaughter and would have had to be dealt with by more conventional means.

Much weight is attributed to the alleged fact that the killing procedure had two distinct phases – one of undressing and one of gassing. There is general agreement among all concerned that the delousing operation to which incoming detainees were subjected did indeed involve two steps – undressing and showering – but when reflecting on the difficult operation of moving thousands of naked people through underground chambers one wonders why the SS would really want to make things so difficult for themselves.

It would have been so much easier to move groups of people into a hall, shut the door on them and then introduce the gas. True, this would mean that the clothes those poor people wore could not easily be recovered, but this was, after all, not the main objective. The operation itself would have been a

great deal easier and the dirty clothes could have been burned right along with their owners. Anyway, in the suitcases they had already given up there should have been enough clothing to make the SS happy.

The First Crematorium

While the Birkenau crematoria were the largest in the Auschwitz area, they were not the first to be operated there, as has already been mentioned. An existing building at the main camp had been equipped with Topf double-muffle ovens and a morgue which is said to have been used for the first gassings. Robert J. van Pelt quotes the testimony of the SS-man Pery Broad on pp. 224ff of his book. Broad claims to have observed from his office in the building of the Political Department the preparations for such actions. He even goes so far as to state what happened inside the building and what the eventual victims said to one another, but this is no doubt hearsay.

According to Broad, the victims, several hundred of them, at first stood in the courtyard of the crematorium, which was surrounded by a high wall and were then led into the building. If we follow the plan that Dwork and van Pelt publish as Plate 3 of their book, the victims at first entered a hall some 4 m wide and 6 m long, then turned right to move on, through a door of normal width, into the corpse-washing room which measured about 4 by 4 meters. Here, they made a left turn, passed through another door of normal width that led into the morgue. Broad states that they were accompanied by several guards who withdrew once the hall had been filled and who closed the door from the side of the corpse-washing room.

This account, again, is somewhat hard to accept, because the whole procedure certainly took some 5 or 10 minutes, which means that the victims at the front of the queue had plenty of time to notice that any showers that may have existed in the morgue were fake, and to react accordingly. It takes little effort to imagine the scenes that would then have taken place in the narrow space in front of the morgue.

Other Camps

Although van Pelt does not discuss camps other than Auschwitz, the same general considerations of crowd management apply *mutatis mutandis* to the other extermination camps as well. At Treblinka, Sobibór or Belzec, the crowd of naked victims, perhaps 1000 or 2000 strong, is said to have stood waiting in a fenced-in open passage some 100 m long and perhaps 3 m wide, leading to the narrow side of a building almost a meter off the ground. The victims then had to climb 3 steps (each of them, it appears, half a meter high), go through a first door to enter a corridor about five feet wide with several normal-size doors on either side. These doors led into the gas chambers which in themselves measured about 4 by 8 meters and could thus accommodate somewhere between 100 and 300 people, depending on whose description the reader chooses to follow.

The guards at the entrance to the building would have had to count the people entering, stopping the queue once the quota for one of the rooms had been reached. Then the guards themselves would have had to enter the corridor, push any hesitating victims forcefully into the particular chamber being filled and close the door on the fighting and screaming crowd. Those outside had to witness all this until it was their turn. Once all the rooms had been filled, the diesel engine would be started up and the exhaust gas fed to the chambers. Even a proponent of the traditional view would have to admit that such a scenario may be difficult to put into practice.

A Year without Gassings

It may well be that similar perplexing pictures crossed Fritjof Meyer's mind and that this strengthened his idea to discard, as killing places, the morgues of the crematoria. In his remarkable paper, Meyer states that, from the moment they were finished (March – June 1943), the crematoria were hardly used for gassings at all, with the killings *probably* (Meyer's term) taking place in two little farmhouses. He attributes the stop on gassings to an order from Himmler given in April, 1943, which specified that all detainees, even those bedridden, should do useful work; however, Meyer does not say why the systematic killings were resumed a year later, nor why he believes that it was.

Regarding these little farmhouses there is the problem, however, that general agreement exists among traditional historians on their having been taken out of service in the spring of 1943, with "Bunker 1" being dismantled and "Bunker 2" being mothballed for a year. Putting two and two together, one may thus safely conclude on the basis of perfectly acceptable sources that for a period of about one year, from the spring of 1943 onwards, no systematic gassings took place in the Auschwitz-Birkenau area at all. In the light of this situation it would be indicated to re-examine all accounts of witnesses for this span of time, in an effort to weed out the unreliable ones.

The conclusion just mentioned is corroborated by the so-called Kas(z)tner Report, which van Pelt knows about but speaks of only indirectly by quoting the French revisionist writer Rassinier; he has the latter state that Kas(z)tner, a leading Jewish figure in Hungary at the time of the "Hungarian action," claimed that the gas chambers at Auschwitz were out of action for 8 or 9 months between the fall of 1943 and May, 1944. Even though Rassinier's quotation on the Kas(z)tner Report appears twice in van Pelt's book, the author does not discuss it, nor does he include Kas(z)tner's name in his index. Van Pelt does not dispute Kas(z)tner's statement.

For those not familiar with Kas(z)tner's activities at the time, let it be said that Kas(z)tner tried to negotiate, on behalf of the Germans, the "Jews-for-trucks" deal with the Allies. The negotiations did not succeed and only one group of about 2,000 Hungarian Jews was able to leave the Axis territory via Switzerland. Kas(z)tner was later mysteriously murdered in Israel.

The "Chimneys"

Another topic that van Pelt treats in his book is the question of the little chimneys on top of the morgues of Crematoria II and III through which the Zyklon B pellets with their load of toxic hydrocyanic acid were supposedly introduced. There has been much discussion on the subject of these openings, the issue being whether there were any openings in the roof slab at all, what they may have looked like, what purpose they may have served, and when they were installed.

Among traditional historians, the argument runs as follows: although the basements of Crematoria II and III were not originally planned as gas chambers; they were modified for the purpose some time in late 1942. This meant (why, actually?) that holes had to be broken into the roof slab and little chimneys raised above them through which the Zyklon B pellets would be dropped into wire-mesh columns below. These latter devices assured an even distribution of the pellets and enabled their extraction, back up through the chimneys, as soon as the victims had died; removal of the bodies could thus start almost immediately. The reasons for such a rush to empty the gassing chamber are a bit unclear because the killing capacity of the morgues in any case exceeded the cremation capacity of the ovens; thus killing even more people than the crematorium could process would have made it difficult to dispose of the bodies promptly.

In a number of books one can find a photograph showing Crematorium II some time in the winter of 1942/43, during its construction phase. The aboveground section of the gassing chamber is visible, as are 4 box-like things on its roof slab, but their location do not quite correspond to the indications given by van Pelt or to the little smudges on air-reconnaissance photographs said to prove their existence.

What is reasonably clear, though, when one considers the height of the above-ground part of the morgue (about 90 cm, given by van Pelt and Dwork, p. 325) is the height of the boxes – about half the height of the morgue protruding from the ground, i.e. something like 50 centimeters. Now, while an object of that height may show up quite clearly on air-reconnaissance photographs, especially if the sunlight strikes it at a low angle, we must not forget that the roof slab of the morgues did not remain bare; in fact, the drawings shown by van Pelt clearly indicate that it was to be covered by a coat of bitumen, a layer of gravel and a layer of earth, coming to an aggregate height of about 50 centimeters. If we assume that the layer of earth would cover itself with vegetation, we may wonder whether the remaining height of those shafts would really show up on air-reconnaissance photographs in any way. The seven dormer windows on the roof of the two crematoria, each of them about one meter high, are hardly visible at all on the same print.

It is worth noting, in this respect, that on p. 208 of *The Case...*, van Pelt shows a drawing of what the wire-mesh columns may have looked like; the top of the column is contained in some kind of shaft with a lid on it, but this lid is almost flush with a line apparently indicating the surface of the earth cover on the crematorium roof. The arbitrariness in the design and in the interpretation of these wire-mesh columns thus becomes obvious.

There is another oddity here: van Pelt argues that the wire-mesh columns and the Zyklon B chimneys had been removed prior to the morgue below being blown up, and that, possibly, the holes had been filled in. It is relatively easy to dismantle the kind of wire-mesh column that witnesses have described (but what was done with them?), whereas, in order to remove the little chimneys, it would have been necessary to remove the earth around them as well, then possibly even fill in the hole (the author muses about this) before blowing up the whole thing – not really very convincing, *prima facie*. As an afterthought, van Pelt brings in the findings of another team claiming to have identified such holes in the rubble on the basis of reinforcing bars that had been cut and bent back on themselves. Not much can be said here about this assertion, because van Pelt gives no further details.

The Gas and the Pellets

In the background of these architectural considerations, there is a more basic question: The Auschwitz camp administration had been aware, practically from the moment it was established, of the work of Degesch Co., the makers of Zyklon B, in the field of the design and operation of disinfestation chambers. As a matter of fact, delousing chambers using the Degesch-*Kreislauf* system were in actual use for the treatment of clothing and other objects as part of the Auschwitz reception facilities – most if not all of the Zyklon B delivered to Auschwitz was employed for this purpose. It is even claimed that the Degesch work had inspired the camp authorities when it came to finding a suitable agent for mass killings, namely Zyklon B. This system functioned in a self-contained and automatic way: in a gas-tight chamber, the Zyklon B cans were safely opened mechanically, the pellets fell into a pan, and a stream of warm air facilitated the speedy release and a good distribution of the gas in the chamber.

This procedure could easily have been incorporated into the homicidal gas chambers of Crematoria II and III equipped, as they were, with ventilation facilities. It would merely have been necessary to connect the respective part of a *Kreislauf* chamber to the air intake of the ventilation system. Instead, we are told that for their homicidal objective the camp authorities opted for a very primitive and potentially hazardous solution that was not even simpler to install than a *Kreislauf* type might have been.

Regarding the toxic gas, the reader will notice in van Pelt's book (p. 499) a line stating "... the cyanide degassed for twenty-four hours after the tin had been opened." For this reason, the author tells us, it was necessary to remove the pellets from the gas chamber through the wire-mesh column before the doors of the chamber could be opened and the bodies taken out. Thus, some 30 minutes after the cyanide pellets had been dumped into the chimney, the little container which was now liberally giving off its poisonous load to the surroundings would have had to be pulled up again to roof level, emptied into a suitable receptacle and safely disposed of. While the supply of Zyklon B cans to the gassing installations has been described by numerous witnesses, no one has ever even mentioned, much less described, this unimpressive but unavoidable second phase of the operation. In fact, witnesses generally agree on the Red Cross vehicle that had, supposedly, brought the poison to the site driving away soon after the gas had been introduced into the chamber.

Furthermore, while one may still accept as possible this kind of primitive procedure for Crematoria II and III with their ventilation systems, such a method becomes inapplicable in the other crematoria or in the farmhouse "bunkers" where the pellets were simply dumped into the gas chambers through suitable openings. In the face of the argument put forth by van Pelt that Crematoria II and III were originally not conceived as homicidal installations and later had to be modified accordingly whereas Crematoria IV and V were built for that very purpose, a dilemma becomes readily apparent: If we are to believe the traditionalists, the farmhouse "bunkers" had proved on numerous occasions that it was sufficient to throw pellets into a room full of victims to achieve the desired result, including speedy removal of the corpses to make room for the next load of victims – but then why was it necessary to improve on this procedure by the installation of wire-mesh columns in Crematoria II and III when they were converted into gas chambers? And if it was necessary to find a better method for Crematoria II and III, why was this new way of doing things not applied to those crematoria (IV and V) that were, from the very beginning, conceived as killing machines?

Thus, the questions of whether the pellets had to be removed from the chambers or not and whether strong mechanical ventilation was needed or not become crucial: one cannot argue both one way (for Crematoria II and III) and the other (for Crematoria IV and V, and/or the bunkers). It is not at all clear why, if the farmhouse bunkers had functioned satisfactorily, it was necessary to install pellet removal devices in Crematoria II and III in spite of their very efficient ventilation system (van Pelt demonstrates this mathematically) while neither ventilation nor pellet removal was deemed advisable in Crematoria IV and V which were being built at the same time and claimed, by van Pelt and Dwork, to have been undisguised killing stations designed for this particular purpose. If we consider the matter in detail, this latter claim is certainly not convincing, because ventilation was as poor in Crematoria IV and V as in the "bunkers", if not worse, quite apart from the fact that the floors could not be properly washed and that the ceiling of the death chambers was at a height of 2 meters and consisted of 3-cm Masonite board – porous and easily damaged.

The Cellars

Here and there, in the text above, we have already looked at the various changes the underground morgues went through in the months before they were finally built as part of Crematoria II and III at Birkenau. If we go to one of the early plans for the new crematorium sketched out by the camp administration (*Anatomy...*, p. 202/3) we see that there were two morgues one labeled “*B-Keller*” (perpendicular to the furnace hall), the other, “*L-Keller*” (in line with the furnace hall). It is likely that L-Keller stands for *Leichenkeller*, corpse cellar i.e. mortuary; B-Keller is not immediately clear, however. In the *Anatomy* text, the authors of the particular chapter (Pressac and van Pelt) explain that the “B” stood for “*belüftet*”, i.e. aerated, but this is not convincing, because both morgues were aerated in one way or another; also, from a linguistic point of view, this explanation jars uncomfortably.

What, then, does the “B” stand for? As everyone knows, the Germans have always been a most law-abiding people, even though the laws under which they have lived may not at all times have been very equitable. In 1934, the government, perhaps wanting to promote cremation (a Germanic custom, at least for VIPs), promulgated a law setting out the procedures that were to apply to crematoria. In view of the irreversibility of the process of cremation it was stipulated that the corpses had to undergo a “*Leichenbeschau*” (corpse inspection) before cremation. We know that, at least for Crematoria II and III, the German construction code which demanded a “dignified” appearance for such buildings was respected (to the point that the edges of doorways etc. were executed in sandstone). It is therefore highly likely, also in view of the activity of the camp surgeon, that corpse-inspection facilities would have been incorporated. If this assumption is accepted, such a place would logically have been labeled *B(eschauungs)-Keller*

In fact, this view becomes quite convincing when we look at the actual crematoria (II and III at Birkenau): There is now a direct entrance into one of the morgues which would take on the function of an inspection hall; after having been inspected, the corpses would be taken to the second mortuary and then to the ovens. The ventilation system added during the design phase corresponded to these functions: the inspection hall had only an air-exhaust, the intake being constituted by the wide door to the outside, whereas the interior location of the mortuary made both a fresh-air and an exhaust system mandatory. The final arrangement was an inversion of the two morgues with respect to earlier schemes as far as a *B*-cellar and an *L*-cellar are concerned – and in the process, the morgues are relabeled - but we must remember that, initially, the location had not yet been fixed and the plan of the crematorium would, in any case, have had to be adapted to the site chosen.

The Letter and the Memo

There is one document that is so important to van Pelt that parts of it are shown on the paper cover of his book; an English translation is given on p. 209f. It is the *Zentralbauleitung* reference copy (carbon copy?) of a letter written on 29 January 1943 to Kammler, a high-ranking SS-officer in Berlin, on the subject of the advancement of the construction works at Crematorium II. For van Pelt, the importance of this document resides in the fact that it explicitly mentions the designation “*Vergasungskeller*” for one of the underground morgues. This, he claims, is a telltale slip with a profound meaning.

In itself, this document presents a number of odd formal aspects: there are no fewer than three typing errors and one wonders whether such a letter, addressed to an important man in the SS-administration in Berlin, actually would have left the camp. Aside from that, it states that “the fires were started in the

ovens ... and they are working most satisfactorily.” Why is this strange? Well, on that very 29 January 1943, there was a meeting between the local representative of AEG, the supplier of the electricals for this crematorium, and *Zentralbauleitung*, the minutes of which van Pelt publishes on p. 330. The gist of the conversation was that it was impossible to finish the installation of the electricals by the end of January; as a stopgap measure, a limited hook-up by mid-February was aimed for.

The interpretation of the letter and/or the memo varies, depending on which of the books written by Pressac and/or van Pelt the reader consults. In his book on the Auschwitz crematoria, Pressac does not discuss the contradictory aspect of the two documents in detail and simply mentions the slip-up of the “*Vergasungskeller*.” In their joint chapter on the crematoria, in the *Anatomy* book (p. 227), Pressac and van Pelt again gloss over the situation and do not state explicitly that Kammler was told a lie with respect to the readiness of the crematorium. They say, however, that it was Kammler who spoke of a “*Vergasungskeller*,” in a letter dated 29 February 1943 by which he promoted Bischoff to a higher rank. Thus, there seems to exist some confusion as to who wrote what, when and to whom, especially as 1943 was not a leap year and thus had no 29 February.

The AEG memo, on the other hand, is discussed by Dwork and van Pelt in their book on the history of Auschwitz (1270, p. 330) but here the authors do not speak of the use of the word “*Vergasungskeller*,” although *Anatomy* had by then been in print for two years and van Pelt had co-authored the chapter on this very topic. Dwork and van Pelt do, however, quote a line from the AEG memo as saying “the capacity of the temporary system [of the electricals] would not allow for simultaneous ‘special treatment’ and incineration.” As opposed to that, the AEG memo reproduced by van Pelt in *The Case* clearly states, “an incineration with simultaneous special treatment will be made possible.” All this does not speak well of the care applied by van Pelt to the analysis and the interpretation of the evidence presented on such a major issue. If the critical analysis of an important and easily viewable document is so superficial, one wonders how other sources that are only cited have been handled.

Heating

With respect to the purpose of Crematoria IV and V, van Pelt points out that their morgues contained “stoves” and argues that these stoves were put in to preheat the rooms to a temperature at which the Zyklon B pellets would quickly release the toxic gas. On the other hand, for the “bunkers,” no stoves have ever been mentioned and for Crematoria II and III, a heat recovery project was discussed with the Topf Co. but they apparently could also function without it. Hence, either the “bunkers” did not work well in the wintertime or the stoves in Crematoria IV and V are not worth much as proof.

Be that as it may, it is worth mentioning that the normal (living) human body releases energy at an average rate of something like 100 watts, or roughly 100 kilocalories per hour. Even if only 4 persons are crowded into a floor area of one square meter, this unit of space will receive almost half a kilowatt of energy (for van Pelt even eight persons can be crammed into one square meter, because the Germans based their streetcar designs on that load). In Crematorium IV or V, for example, where - to use reasonable figures - perhaps 350 people might have been herded into a space of about 90 square meters, such a space would have been warmed up by a total amount of human energy amounting to some 35 kilowatts - much, much more than would be used for heating in a normal building (something like 6 or 8 kW would be the usual practice in this case), and the atmosphere in that room would within minutes have reached a temperature amply sufficient for proper vaporization of Zyklon B pellets. This is another instance where van Pelt, trying to prove one story, invalidates another argument.

The Smoke

A further example for this kind of dilemma is the smoke which witnesses claim to have seen rising from the chimneys of the crematoria. For some of the witnesses, the smoke was accompanied by flames, but this is certainly a decorative element we may discard. Most of the witnesses are in agreement on the point that the smoke was thick and black. In a way, it is a bit amusing to see that revisionists, for quite some time, maintained that there was no such smoke or, at least, that it was present only when the furnaces were initially fired up, whereas van Pelt goes to great lengths to convince his readers that the stacks of crematoria in operation smoked all the time. Today, somehow, revisionists have apparently accepted the idea that there was, indeed, visible smoke and so everybody should be happy.

Again, there is another side to the matter: if there was dense smoke whenever the crematoria were in operation, and if the period between May and October 1944 was the time when the gassings and burnings reached their peak, to the point that the crematoria could not absorb the alleged load of up to 25,000 corpses a day and the authorities again had to revert to open-air burnings, we should see smoke belching out all the time not only from the chimneys of all the operational crematoria, but also from the incineration trenches.

However, the air-reconnaissance photographs published by van Pelt, taken on 31 May, 26 June and 25 August 1944, show no smoke at all coming from any of the crematoria. This means that on at least three of the most hectic days of homicidal activity the crematoria themselves stood idle. On the photograph of 31 May, there is a wisp of white smoke in the yard behind Crematorium V, similar to what can be seen on the air-reconnaissance photograph dated 23 August 1944 that will be discussed below. Aside from this particular site, one can say that, when those photographs were taken, no open-air cremations of any kind had been going on anywhere in or near the camp for at least a day or two, if not more, because we know from the experience gathered during the foot-and-mouth epidemic which struck western Europe a few years ago that the pyres set up to incinerate the dead animals would burn for several days giving off much smoke, and smolder or be hot for up to two weeks.

Open-air Incinerations

There exists an air-reconnaissance photograph taken on 23 August 1944, documented elsewhere. Like the others, it shows no smoke at all over the chimneys but this time, as on 31 May 1944, there is a small column of white smoke rising between Crematorium V and the camp perimeter; this has been interpreted as being proof of the gassing and burning of a convoy of 759 Jews from the Mauthausen camp that had arrived at Auschwitz the previous day. The photograph is clear enough for the size of the burning site to be estimated; the dimensions of Crematorium V, directly next to the fire, provide us with a convenient scale: We see that the site is perhaps 40 meters long and 5 meters wide; whether the wisp of white smoke comes from the whole site or only from one end is not easy to make out. We can also see that there was not much room on either side of the fire; it burned in the narrow space of about 30 meters between the camp fence and the crematorium.

The sad experience of the FMD epidemic has taught us that the most efficient pyre is long and rather narrow; it should not be made wider than some 3 meters. Wider pyres tend to collapse in the middle for lack of air and combustion will be incomplete; not much can be done about that when it occurs because one cannot get close enough to stoke the center. It is also safe to assume that the SS at Auschwitz,

having had to burn at least some 50,000 to 100,000 corpses in earlier years, would have realized what was necessary to burn corpses on a pyre in the most efficient way.

With the proper kind of layout, the FMD procedures tell us, one can cremate half a dozen sheep-size animals per linear meter of pyre and this should also hold for a corresponding number of human beings, but the newspaper articles on FMD also report that it takes a couple of days to build such a pyre for 800 sheep carcasses, even using modern mechanical equipment, if only because of the fuel that has to be brought in and properly stacked. Taking into account the time it takes to build a pyre, the duration of the incineration itself, which extends over several days, and the fact that as long as there is still fatty or oily matter to be burned the smoke will be blackish rather than white it is quite doubtful that the white smoke is what remained of the detainees from Mauthausen, or any other such group of people, for that matter. If we take into account Höss's assertion that, at that time, it was no longer possible to burn corpses at night, the interpretation of this wisp of whitish smoke as stemming from a pyre on which corpses were being burned becomes even more arbitrary.

The Fuel

When it comes to open-air incinerations, the question of fuel takes on great importance, because fuel consumption in this case is so much higher than for crematoria on account of the much higher heat loss. Here, again, we can use data gathered during the FMD crisis from which one can deduce that one cubic meter of dry wood would be needed to burn three average human corpses – a cord of dry wood for ten bodies. The questions concerning the logistics of fuel supply for the incinerations (other than coke for the crematoria) have hardly been touched upon in the literature, although they are crucial in this connection. These problems are glossed over by witnesses, who say simply that oil or methanol was poured over the corpses which then continued to burn by themselves in some sort of trench, but this is not particularly convincing.

We must realize that if thousands of corpses are to be burned continually in trenches (not the best arrangement anyway) it is highly dangerous to douse them with methanol, because this substance is volatile, toxic, may lead to blindness (even SS-men would be affected) and its vapors are explosive. By the time enough methanol has been poured over the corpses in a long trench, there would be enough of it in the air on a hot day to blow up when the fire is lit, the minimum explosive concentration of methanol being only a few percent by volume. It would also be practically impossible to add methanol or similar substances to a trench already on fire, to say nothing of the fact that once these flammable liquids have spent themselves, the corpses would be charred but still very much present, if only because the flames burn on the surface of the fluid and not around the bodies (as in the case of a stacked arrangement of wood and corpses). After Hitler and Eva Braun had committed suicide, their corpses were taken outside, doused with 40 liters of gasoline (which was then lit from a distance by means of a burning rag), but incineration was far from complete when the fire had died down.

Even if only a thousand corpses were to be burned daily in the open air, roughly 300 cubic meters (about 100 cords, or 30 truckloads) of dry wood would have to be brought to the sites for each load of bodies, and a site of over 100 meters in length would be blocked for at least a week because the ash retains the heat for a long time and cannot be handled right away for the operations of crushing residual bones and removing gold teeth that have been reported in the literature. Also, enough space around the sites would have to be made available, not only for the considerable activity associated with the building phase of the pyre, but also because, in the initial phase of the cremation itself, the heat radiation is so

strong that a minimum distance of something like 100 feet on all sides would have to be maintained. This means that only insignificant numbers of corpses could have been burnt in spaces like the small area behind Crematorium V.

From the experience gathered with FMD incinerations, anyone can easily see that in terms of logistics, time, fuel, space etc. the material demands for the open-air incineration of 10,000 human corpses a day (as some witnesses would have us believe) would be so enormous as to exceed by far the capabilities of the Auschwitz camp administration. By itself, the fuel needed, about 3,000 cubic meters (some 1,000 cords) of dry wood, would have required the availability of a fleet of thirty 10-ton trucks, if each truck is assumed to have made ten trips a day (including loading and unloading), to say nothing of the source and the supply of (dry) wood that have never been described, or the way in which it was handled at the camp – or paid for, for that matter.

Furthermore, the initial generation of dense smoke, especially under varying wind conditions (direction and speed) would be very awkward with respect to the manning of any watchtowers nearby. The flames and intense heat associated with the early phases of burning would have to be taken into account in any kind of analysis of the possible location of pyres; any such activities in areas designated vaguely as “in the woods” or “behind this little farmhouse” (straw-thatched, to boot, as some witnesses would have us believe) must be regarded with great skepticism.

In the mass of statements about Auschwitz with which van Pelt confronts the readers of his book we also have a remark by the camp commander Höss regarding the operation of pyres. Höss said that, fundamentally, the capacity of cremation on pyres at Auschwitz was unlimited; it was only when enemy air activity became a threat over the Auschwitz area from 1944 onwards that problems arose, because it was no longer possible to burn corpses at night (this period of potential air-raids coincides, by the way, with the greatest homicidal activity ascribed to the camp).

At first glance, this sounds quite reasonable; the fires would, after all, be a good beacon for Allied bombers flying through the night. If we reflect a bit on this question, though, things become more than a little less convincing, especially in the light of the FMD evidence which tells us that such pyres burn and smolder for days on end. Therefore, if they were to be made safe for the night, they would have had to be extinguished – an operation which, while possible, would cause a terrible mess as can easily be imagined: the incinerations are said to have been carried out in trenches which would now end up being full of water and half-charred corpses, with wooden logs floating about. It would also be very difficult to restart such fires or any new fires at the same site the following day. The total length of the pyres needed for a repetitive daily load of 10,000 bodies would be several miles, because the business cannot be accomplished within 24 hours - we must remember that it takes several days for human or animal carcasses to burn completely on a pyre.

Even for a place as swampy as Birkenau the logistical problems of the corresponding water supply would be insuperable – and no witness has ever mentioned such a fire-fighting scene. In the unlikely case that fuel oil was used for the cremations, water would not be suitable for extinguishing the fire, because the burning oil floats on top and may even spill out over the sides of those “trenches” – a horrifying scenario for all concerned. Readers may draw their own conclusions regarding the reliability of any such statements.

Furthermore, one wonders if daylight burnings would really have been safer than night-time fires, because the inevitable thick black smoke from such fires is as good a signal for guiding bombers during the day as a blazing fire would be at night. Lastly, anyone conversant with bombing raids in World War II would know that by 1944 the technique of using a master bomber to mark the target had been perfected to a point where signals from the ground were perhaps helpful but in no way indispensable to the attackers, at any time of the day or night. We have here another example of van Pelt's indiscriminate use of any argument he happens to come across.

All this is not to mean that no corpses at all were burnt in the open air at Birkenau. It is certainly true that the many victims (between 50,000 and 100,000 depending on whose book you read) of typhoid fever and other diseases that were counted before the Birkenau crematoria became operational had to be disposed of in this way, to say nothing of people who were shot or who died of ill-treatment during the period. Most of these burnings seem to have taken place in the autumn of 1942 outside the western limit of the camp.

The Man Himself

Another aspect that has to be taken into account by anyone wanting to gain an insight into the history of the camps at Auschwitz and Birkenau is the question of the reliability of the statements of the commander of the camp, Rudolf Höss. It is by now common knowledge that he was tortured by his British captors and forced to sign an outrageous confession that was originally formulated in English. This can be seen clearly from the German word *Ausrottungs-Erleichterungen* used in the text Höss was made to sign, which is an erroneous translation of the expression "extermination facilities" used in the English text. It reads in German as "something that makes it easier to exterminate" and would never have been used by Höss himself to describe his task. The proper German word would have been "*Ausrottungs-Einrichtungen.*"

We now know that the figure of 3 million victims admitted to by Höss is, to put it mildly, an exaggeration and this in itself should disqualify Höss as a witness. The least one could have expected from a man like van Pelt is that he would expose clearly how Höss's exaggerated figures had been extracted from him and discuss why, in spite of this, some of the statements he made to the Allies or to the Poles should be retained; yet he does not do this, even going so far as to state explicitly at the very beginning of his book, that Höss, under cross-examination by the American prosecutor Amen, had been stated to have signed his confession voluntarily - in a conspiratorial way, one can perhaps understand what Höss wanted to convey.

Van Pelt himself says, however, that with the exception of Höss, no one in the camp had been able to gather sufficient aggregate data to establish a credible figure for the number of victims, and his uncritical attitude with respect to Höss's confession therefore becomes hard to accept. A key witness such as Höss would certainly have warranted the pages of detailed exculpation van Pelt devotes to the Polish judge Jan Sehn who was overly quick, in those early days after the war, to draw his conclusions from various German terms involving the word "*Sonder...*" and who made a number of nonsensical or inexplicable statements that van Pelt presents in his text. The author recognizes some of them as incredible and says so (cremation capacity figures); others he simply lets stand as they are, the preheating of the morgue by portable coke braziers, for example, or the air being "pumped out" of the gas chambers before the Zyklon B pellets were thrown in.

These are half-truths: coke braziers were probably used in the morgues during construction, because the crematoria were built in the winter months, and air surely was exhausted from some of the morgues; that was, after all, why the ventilation system had been installed in the first place – but to present them as yet another element in a collection of “converging evidence” is weakening rather than strengthening the “case for Auschwitz.”

Conclusion

Again, this is the fundamental deficiency of the book: we are confronted with errors or impossibilities, but the author does not say anything more about them even though he does seem to notice these deficiencies; at times, he says that there is something questionable about certain aspects, but then does not go ahead and ask the necessarily implied questions. Far from telling you what you always wanted to know about the camp, R. J. van Pelt has put together a repetitious mixture of facts and fiction; his book shows on what shaky foundations our present view of Auschwitz and Birkenau is anchored.

As was noted initially, Yehuda Bauer of Yad Vashem has spoken of the difficulty of documenting the really central events of the Holocaust. By that, he must mean that no one has yet succeeded in presenting solid evidence for the gassings at Auschwitz or anywhere else, for if that is not what he means by “documenting the central events,” what is? Robert J. van Pelt may have written his book with the aim of surmounting Bauer’s difficulty, but far from having achieved this ambitious task, he has only opened up more cracks in the evidence and brought about new contradictions in its interpretation – *The Case for Auschwitz* is a book that need not have been written — and certainly should not be read, at least not if taken at face value.

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